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Fashion and old age. Paradox or tactic of negotiating normality

Streszczenie

Moda w społeczeństwach późno-nowoczesnych przeszła szereg zmian. Jednak nadal jest mechanizmem tworzenia i odtwarzania różnic społecznych. Autorów interesują linie demarkacyjne, do jakich utworzenia i podtrzymywania przyczyniła i przyczynia się moda. Zwłaszcza te związane z ciałem i wiekiem. Moda jest źródłem asymetrii generacyjnych, sposobem wykluczania z uczestnictwa w kulturze i społeczeństwie z racji wieku i cielesności. Jej paradoksalna natura sprawia, że ten aspekt jest niezauważany i naturalizowany. W nieco lepszej sytuacji znajdują się osoby niepełnosprawne. Ich obecność w tym polu jest przynajmniej sprawcą semantycznego zamieszania, nowych taktyk negocjowania normalności i przedmiotem naukowej refleksji.

Słowa klucze:

moda, ubiór, starość, negocjowanie normalności

Abstract

Fashion in postmodern societies has gone through a series of changes. However, it remains a mechanism for producing and reproducing social differences. The authors of this paper are interested in the demarcation lines created by the fashion industry, especially those which are related to the body and age. Fashion is a source of generational asymmetry and of exclusions from participation in culture and society, based on age and bodily presentation. Its paradoxical nature renders it unnoticeable and naturalized. The disabled are in a somewhat better situation. Their presence in the domain of fashion causes at least some semantic commotion, generates new tactics of reaching normality and becomes a subject for scholarly reflection.

Key words:

fashion, clothing, old age, negotiation of normality

1. Fashion, clothing and age

Fashion is a polysemantic and broad notion. In our paper, it will be used in a more specific sense; we will understand fashion as clothing design which causes social interest and response. At the moment, when new designs are adopted by some social group and become fashionable (as defined above), it initiates imitation and evolves into stylizations which give people an opportunity for self-expression. Whether we like it or not, fashion

is to a great extent instrumental in the formation of social differences. It is a mechanism of inclusion, exclusion and localization. To this end, it makes use of the intimate relations between clothing, identity and belonging to social classes and groups. Wearing specific clothes constitutes “the empirical reality of dressed bodies” (Twigg 2009: 1). It also serves many functions. Besides prosaic protection against cold weather, it allows for the preservation of respect toward one’s own and others’ intimacy. It is also ornamental and as such may attract the interest of a potential sexual partner. It also, however, communicates social position and rank, and reflects the values and worldviews of the wearer. Specific outfits can be misleading and make the wearer look older or younger (as long as he or she remains dressed...). However, “clothed” is not synonymous with “fashionable”. It is relevant in the context of the category of age, which is our concern. Older people are not the target market of fashion designers or the fashion industry, which ignores old age. This does not change the fact that older people remain dressed and have to make choices about what to wear. Old people are a part of the social reality which has created fashion and consumption as a form of socio-cultural participation. One can legitimately say that this state of affairs results in exclusions and the marginalization of old age. Paradoxically, it is a dynamic which is present in ageing societies. In the case of women, worship of youth, also as expressed in dressing styles, can deprive people of the very self-expression which is so highly valued and praised in our culture. In comparison with the abundance of other difficulties faced by older people (especially in Polish everyday life), this issue may appear irrelevant. However, we represent the point of view that small and seemingly insignificant occurrences can be camouflaged signals of relevant and broader socio-cultural tendencies.

2. Fashion in the postmodern world

As the rivalry between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy elevated the position of fashion, it became one of the most relevant and characteristic phenomena of contemporary societies (Krajewski 2005: 66–67). Since then, many changes have occurred. The most important of these changes are:

- autonomization (relative independence from other domains and the development of specific codes of communication),
- democratization (the availability of a variety of social categories as the result of the improvement of the lower classes’ economic situation and technological advancements),
- a focus on ornamentation and beautification (specifically with respect to visual self-presentation; earlier it was a clear indication of class differences that were of the utmost importance),

- an appeal to identity codes (outward appearance is not an accurate replica of social identity any more),
- use of egalitarian language within the field of fashion (its assumptions and categories refer to the ideal: a society composed of individuals capable of making independent decisions and with equal opportunities),
- decentralization (various classes have their own elites to follow; street style has come into existence),
- lastly, reversed direction of imitation (i.e. from bottom to top, although top-to-bottom imitation still occurs). (Szlendak, Pietrowicz 2007)

These changes have triggered relevant consequences for fashion as a tool of class positioning, and for objects used as markers of social status, but they have not led to the loss of previously established mechanisms. Wealth and consumption still remain central to fashion, as do body, gender, and generational differences. We can still observe the demarcation lines previously established by fashion; we can still see it maintain regulation, control and social distances. Fashion still supports and replicates social order in the context of class, gender, generation and consumption. What has changed is that to some observers the differentiations are not as explicit as they were some time ago.

3. Fashion and old age

Clothing, body and age are closely interconnected. Clothes form an envelope, which contains the body, covers it, protects it and presents it to the world. The body makes the clothing alive and individual. Age is inseparably bound to the body. So far, ageing is not optional and it indicates that there are limits to the body's plasticity; it may turn into resisting and decaying matter. This could happen due to ongoing illness, extreme physical strain or paralyzing fear. However, in this paper we are concerned with a body which is fully functional physically and mentally, but has begun to change in appearance. Such changes place it in the domain of specific cultural meanings and patterns, which determine social roles. There is nothing unusual about it. This rule applies to every age group, but the case of old people is different in a few interesting ways. Firstly, roles determined by old age can limit people's repertoire of behaviour and experience. We assume that changes in appearance cause alterations in the identity of the subject. This is why, if we ignore meanings and social patterns related to ageing, we can fall into the trap of stigmatization and marginalization. People can even lose their status of normal, trustworthy individuals, and become grotesque creatures. Clothing contributes to this process by playing a role in generational demarcation. The most important of these borders separates children from adults. It is marked by cut and colour. Sweet little dresses in bright colours are suitable for little girls, but not for adult women. Some time ago, an equally definite border ran between adulthood and old age. Certain types of clothing

were perceived as appropriate for older women: longer skirts or dresses, sleeves that cover the arms and shoulders, and garments that cover the neck and neckline. Subdued colours were obligatory. Such an outfit, which avoids bodily exposition and sexual ostentation, conveys modesty, dignity, distance, and partial withdrawal (very similar rules applied and still apply to corpses in coffins). Some of these rules still function. Researchers believe that nowadays, generational ordering is as influential in fashion as class hierarchies were in the past. “Styles now diffuse down the age hierarchy, as they once did down the class hierarchy” (Twigg 2009: 7). The association between unfashionable clothing and old age is a result of the very limited selection of garments marketed toward the older generation. It may even be called gerontophobic fashion. Secondly, social inscription of bodily appearance does not result in automatic mental transformation. Older people can be more or less aware of changes and socio-cultural directives. At times, we can observe older men and women who dress and behave as if they were biologically young. However, it is very difficult to assess whether what we observe is rooted in lack of insight concerning ongoing changes and/or lack of social awareness of socio-cultural imperatives, or whether it is the result of a consciously chosen resistance strategy against the idealization of youthful appearance. If it is due to the former, the subject’s advanced age would be visible only from the perspective of others, and not from the point of view of the subject. The latter seems to be a very demanding strategy. Since the preservation of a slim and muscular body is one of the resistance strategies against old age (a lean body is associated with youthful appearance and with early pre-maternal adolescence and physical attractiveness in both sexes), it requires a huge amount of discipline and effort at the stage of menopause and andropause. It is, however, a socially effective and potentially rewarding strategy, at least up to a certain point. The subject’s choice of clothing entails risk, since social reception of the attempted imitation of younger age is much less favourable. Wearing tight and revealing clothing and breaking colour conventions are very often seen as failed attempts at regaining one’s youth. Social judgements in such cases are usually harsh. Older royalty, who are allowed to appear in public in brightly coloured costumes, seem to constitute an intriguing exception to this rule. Thirdly, social bodily inscriptions may cause transformation of internal personal space. The acceptance of externally imposed categories, programming experiences, emotions and behaviours varies in terms of range and can reach different levels. It is often said by people from different age groups that old bodies are non-aesthetic. This results in an expectation that old people have to dress carefully. Bodily exposure must be avoided. In such cases, clothing is more than a mere wrapping; it becomes a cover or a hideaway. Ageing bodies go through a process of slow seclusion, until clothing finally becomes the *anachoresis* of the old body. So it seems that clothing plays a relevant role, as it sets limits to *anachoresis*, discrimination and exclusion from public space. Here, age-appropriate fashionable clothing can enable public participation. Contemporary voices often admit that people in

the autumn of their lives should have access to such domains as consumption and fashion. One could ask where the problem lies. One problem arises out of a confusion between fashion and clothing. Clothing as “the empirical reality of dressed bodies” is a part of older people’s life experience. They wear clothes and make choices about them, yet their options are very restricted. Younger age groups have access to a larger and more diverse range of garments. Getting dressed does not equal being fashionable. The fashion world seems to be uncomfortable with or even frightened of the elderly. The fashion world plays with taboo and pushes limits, at times engaging in risky and very controversial projects. In well-known fashion magazines, we can find photographs of children stylized as adult and sexualized individuals – within a culture where the taboo on child sexuality carries the status of divine dogma, and sexual activity is perceived as the most important verge of adulthood. On catwalks, models openly present physical disability, transvestitism, and transsexual preferences, but the ungracefully aged are banned from such places. From time to time, on the front cover of “style bibles” like *Vogue* or *Harp-er’s Bazaar*, readers can see photos of pop stars in their 40s, 50s and 60s. It is calculated that the age of front-page celebrities has been raised during the last decade by 10 to 15 years, and teenage models are supplanted by mature women – mainly actresses and singers. However, a single gaze at such pictures reveals extensive use of Photoshop. Real age has disappeared; it has been neutralized like an unpleasant smell.

4. Paradox or negotiation of normality?

Disabled people have entered the world of fashion, and this unusual encroachment was quickly noticed by researchers. Up to now, attempts by non-normative bodies to appear in media within the domain of fashion have been treated as ways of renegotiating normality and reacting against exclusion (Vainshtein 2012). Not everyone agrees with this point of view. Sarah Heiss (2011) does not deny that domains can become dehermetized, but she voices some doubts by saying that what we observe in the case of disability is rather an ideology of naïve integration at work. What can be said of the same phenomenon with respect to old people? Is it semantic confusion, deconstruction of old age, distortion of reality or some kind of satire or grotesque? Distortions are certainly present. One can find them at the level of language (magazines advising people in their 60s, 70s or even 80s on how to be fashionable like using the term “middle aged woman”) and image (the photographed bodies meet the requirements of cultural norms, but a slim build is accessible to very few older people, due to hormonal changes, the accumulation of fatty tissue, the lowering of the uterus, etc.). Maybe it is related “to wider set of social processes whereby individuals in modern societies are less age differentiated across the life span. Midlife becomes an extended plateau reaching higher and higher up the age span” (Twigg 2009: 9). The presented stylizations are equally problematic. The majority

of clothing ranges aimed at older buyers do not create a new pattern of appeal, but rather copy trends and styles targeting young people. This transplantation of trends and styles into a different age category has (not too surprisingly) rather grotesque effects. This kind of course of action should be seen as one more marker of the dominance of youth. Elderly people do not only use clothing as a prop to portray age. It is significant to what extent older people are capable of enacting their age with the use of various and progressively “younger” outfits. In this regard we agree with Julia Twigg (*ibid.*): “I would suggest that once again the physicality of the body comes into play. Youthfulness is not just a product of performance. Adopting youthful styles is not necessarily a route to appearing young, and is sometimes the reverse. Indeed exaggeratedly youthful styles can point up age, exposing the disjuncture between the expectations of the dress and the aged body that wears it”.

In consumer culture, fashion is presented as a useful tool for the creation of an individual, unique version of the “self” through the consumption of goods. Let us pass over the fact that this aspect of clothing and agency implanted in clothing is grossly overestimated. A short walk on the streets of any big or small European city shows how similar people look in contemporary society. This is partly due to the obvious fact that most of us buy our clothes in shops, where what we can see in the shop window depends on mass production and the dictum of fashion dictators. It also indicates how narrow the margin of our self-expression is. Conformity and order are at least as relevant as agency and choice. Wearing clothing that is appropriate to a given occasion and to one’s age is of major importance. A long time ago, Simmel (2006) pointed at specific competing tendencies within the domain of fashion, namely equalization and differentiation, or fitting into a specific frame of reference and falling outside of it. The newly established connection between clothing on one hand and expression, identity and choice on the other – coupled with a lack of interest in the fashion industry among the elderly – makes those categories, which are relevant for contemporary societies, very problematic in the eyes of old people. It is not clear what kind of clothing is age-appropriate for them. The difficulty of choosing appropriate clothing and the fear of making a mistake constitute a part of many women’s shopping experience (Twigg 2009: 4). These problems can be avoided by following the traditional guidelines of style, as professional stylists do. Finally, the older buyer’s choices are limited to bad taste, dullness and infantilization, or inspiration taken from tradition. Yet the situation is more complicated than that. Firstly, cultural differences play a relevant role. Secondly, there are fashion blogs, ran by young professionals, which expose the beauty of this phase of life as inscribed in clothing. Thirdly, for the fashion industry “this shift to a destructured, non-age ordered market is certainly how the fashion industry likes to present the issue; though this may reflect the wish to avoid negative messages through overt labelling of clothes in age terms” (*ibid.*: 6).

5. Final remarks

The issues presented in this paper can be interpreted in at least two contradictory ways. (*ibid.*: 10) Firstly, one may claim that the development of consumer culture gives the older generation open access to self-expression and identity formation. Supporters of this point of view indicate that consumption creates a solid base for social integration and is a source of pleasure and of identities. This is why its extension to advanced age groups leads to the integration of older people within mainstream culture. In relation to clothing, it denotes the decline of a culture of old age categorization and its colourless, grey and gloomy tastelessness. In their opinion, there is no reason for older people not to wear the same clothing or not to shop in the same fashionable shopping centres as younger people. Especially for women, it means liberation from negative prescriptions concerning sexuality and outward appearance, and escape from the tight grasp of moralistic language. It offers them the possibility to continue their earlier sense of self in the context of a 'women's culture of pleasure in clothing'. When one looks at the issue from this perspective, there seems to be no reason why older women should be exiled from this area of aesthetic pleasure. It represents the view that there are grounds for thinking that significant cultural changes have occurred in this matter. However, we should carefully record the disappearing evidence of age categorization. Additionally, consumption relies on income (wealthy older people have it, others do not), and for many decades the fashion world has been reproducing segregation between wealthy and poor. As such it is strongly defined by parameters that are out of reach to many elderly people.

The second approach provides a much more complex analysis, backed by research. Old people talk negatively about their own bodies, which are perceived as non-aesthetic, disappointing, dysfunctional, and the source of negative sensations (like pain or fear). Hence it seems better to separate and compartmentalize the self and the body (Banaszak, Florkowski 2010: 42). Advocates of this point of view point out that being (after a certain age) socially and culturally transparent has its advantages, especially when considering the constantly growing demands imposed on young men and women regarding the construction of desirable social images. Finally, one can escape from the restrictive hold of physicality. It does not have to stand in opposition to the enjoyment which one can draw from clothing. A beautiful, well-fitting outfit can become a source of pleasure, and a positive evaluation of it can provide the wearer an opportunity to achieve embodied identity. In other words, it creates a chance for negotiation of normality. However, in this context it gains a lot of significance, and failures may be seen as more important than they seemed at first glance. Adoption of new fashion styles, or just the avoidance of those tainted with ageing, can assist the wearer in achieving both self-presentation that is less defined by age, and the above-mentioned benefits inscribed in the last stage of life. Although age is a key social issue, it is naturalized and invisible. It is very similar to

the treatment of gender concerns some years ago. We do not appreciate its significance and there is not enough focus on these matters.

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